

**DEPARTMENT OF
VETERANS AFFAIRS**

MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER COUNCIL GUIDE



**VA MENTAL HEALTH CONSUMER
LIAISON COUNCIL OF THE COMMITTEE
ON CARE OF SEVERELY CHRONICALLY
MENTALLY ILL VETERANS**

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Mental Health Consumer Council

A Mental Health Consumer Council is a group of mental health consumers, family members, representatives from community agencies and Veteran Service



Organizations who provide a consumer point of view on questions, policies and other matters relevant to consumers or that affect consumers of mental health services. The Council should also include Department of Veterans Affairs staff that are affiliated with mental health programs at the Medical Center or VISN.

Selecting a Coordinator

A coordinator needs to be selected who has skills in working with a diverse group. The coordinator needs to be motivated and have time to develop the Consumer Council. An essential understanding of the mental health system within the medical center and VISN will be important. The coordinator will facilitate the development of the structure of the committee and the plan for operation. The coordinator can have a planning group to help in the development of the consumer council. Selection criteria for members will need to be developed by the coordinator. The coordinator does not necessarily take on the role of chairperson for the Consumer Council since this would ideally be done by a consumer. Develop a written responsibility statement of the members that will be recruited for the Consumer Council that outlines what will be expected and the ground rules of how the council members will function. The first stages of developing the consumer council will be the most time consuming.

Recruiting Consumer Council Members

Recruiting consumer council members takes time and effort. A first step is deciding what qualities and skills an individual can bring to the consumer council. This can be done in a checklist and will develop a profile of potential members. Potential members for the consumer council are first and foremost consumers of mental health services within the Department of Veteran Affairs Medical Centers. Identification of these individuals can be done through recommendations from clinicians who work in the various mental health programs. Direct recruitment can be done by flyers. It is recommended that family members be considered as potential council members.

Organizations that represent mental health consumers, veterans service organizations and special veteran community groups should be considered. The National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, the National Mental Health Association, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration are examples of organizations that may have local affiliates with veterans or their families who would be interested in participating. Service organizations, such as the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Vietnam Veterans of America are also potential members of consumer councils. Some tips include:

- ⇒ Do not overload people who already serve on many committees.
- ⇒ Use networking. Start with core people and have them suggest other contacts.
- ⇒ Contact people personally. Start with phone calls or visits, then follow up with letters
- ⇒ If possible, interview prospective members face to face.

Characteristics of Members

In selecting members, it is important to find individuals who can represent veterans as a group. The purpose of the Council will be involvement in overall planning within mental health programs. It will not be a mechanism to solve individual grievances. If a trend or pattern of problems is discovered, it may be appropriate for the council to investigate. Members who are selected, however, need to know that it will not be an avenue for solving personal problems with the system. Members must have time and a commitment to participate on a Consumer Council. Some guideline for attendance should be adopted. Commitment will be a key element in the success of the committee. Other important areas to explore are the ability of members to work with a group, to understand data, and to be connected with other veterans where information can be gathered.

Developing an Agenda

The Consumer Council will need to start with a statement of purpose and this can be a simple statement. The vision which is agreed upon by the members should be contained in the statement of purpose. The consumer council members need to be clear about their group responsibilities. Early in the planning process, the scope of the Consumer Council should decide what functions to perform. Will the council review data pertaining to mental health programs? Should the council be involved in assessing consumer satisfaction or involved in decisions regarding the realignment of services as well as program closures and development of new programs?

Identifying Council goals and setting the agenda can be done by doing a needs assessment or a brainstorming session with members as to important issues they want to discuss. There should be an agenda for each meeting and follow up for issues raised during a meeting. A needs assessment can be done by using a survey tool or doing a focus group of veterans who use mental health services.

Keeping Members Involved and Interested

Orientation and training will be essential to new Mental Health Consumer Council members. Orientation materials should provide them with an overview of the V A organization, of its basic structures and workings, of its programs, employees, volunteers and clients.

For the Consumer Council to be successful and productive, the members need to feel that their work is important and will make a difference. To achieve this end, initial efforts should work on areas that impact overall mental health programs. The council will need support from the VISN and Medical Center staff, thus the council and its members should be introduced to key VISN and Medical Center staff. Members of the Council will need to have a contact person who can help them when they have questions and who can guide them in obtaining access to the system. Invitations to special programs within the VISN and Mental Health Medical Center programs would provide added education to members. There should be some yearly recognition of the members of the Consumer Council.

Creative Solutions for geographic Barriers

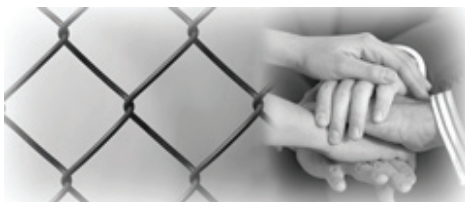
In many situations it may be difficult to have face to face meeting. There may be a need to set up telephone conferencing as an alternative. This can be followed up by e-mails and mailings to members without e-mail.

Meetings can be rotated in different locations so that more members can attend and the same members who live at a distance are not always at a disadvantage.

Requesting a budget for travel to reimburse members for their travel can be arranged. This would require a justification and setting aside dollars for travel purposes. Exploring other transportation such as ride sharing or using a facility van can be useful.



Barriers and Strategies



Reports in the literature have identified six barriers to effective consumer participation on mental health boards and committees.

Incongruity between stated values and actual practice

For good congruency between values of the organization and actual practice, the consumer participants need to review and clarify values within the group. Any value statements need to be honestly stated and checked out with consumer members.

Tokenism

Tokenism refers to the number of consumer representatives and the level of responsibility assigned. Numerous authors in recent years have addressed the importance of having significant numbers of consumers in decision making capacities.

Lack of representation

When selecting members, consumers with various perspectives should be sought. It is important to seek out less experienced consumers to participate on boards and committee rather than relying solely on high-profile articulate consumers who are frequently overwhelmed with numerous requests.

Role Strain

Role strain comes from unclear mandates, roles, and functions. Explain what is expected of members. Sensitivity to these issues with consumer members is important.

Poor Communication

Poor communication is a barrier. It is necessary to communicate clearly. The jargon of medical and legal professionals can be confusing, and knowing how the system operates can be difficult. Time and orientation are needed for consumer members. Consumers need to be treated with respect and kept informed.

Economic Factors

Finances can be a barrier, since time and transportation can be expensive. Professionals get time off from work and are paid, but the volunteer board may not have that luxury. The financial abilities of council members must be addressed.

Resources

The Consumer Council will need resources to accomplish its tasks. The following is not an exhaustive list, but it provides examples of resources to include in the planning process.

Space

A centrally located meeting site will need to be chosen. This location can be rotated. Since some members may have longer distances to travel, the site should be convenient to as many as possible. Storage space for supplies such as flip charts or other visual aids would be helpful, depending on the needs of the group.



Secretary Duties

It is essential to get minutes of meetings typed and distributed to the council.

Timely notification of meetings and mailing

of relevant information before meetings becomes part of a smooth running Consumer Council. Requesting a secretary be assigned to take the minutes of the meeting will help the council function smoothly. An agenda should be planned in advance and distributed to members of the Council prior to the meeting.

Transportation

Veterans and family members may need assistance with transportations. This need can be assessed as part of the planning process. If possible, the lack of financial resources and of transportation should be overcome as barriers to attending Consumer Council meetings. There may be resources within the community, or a contingency fund can be established to assist those with transportation problems.

The financial needs of members is an additional consideration. Economics can be a barrier to consumer participation and will have to be addressed, both from a policy perspective and with each individual member.

Sources of Information

Sources of information for the Consumer Council need to be identified. The data need to be understandable to lay people, and the amount and format of data should not overwhelm members of the Consumer Council. In the area of mental health, some suggested sources for information are:

National Mental Health Program Performance

Monitoring System - This report is produced by the Northeast Program and Evaluation Center in West Haven, Connecticut and provides an array of data pertaining to mental health programs. The data used with a Consumer Council would need to be selected from the overall report and tailored to the needs of the council. For example there is a section on Consumer Satisfaction.

VISN Business Plan - This report can provide information relevant to the reorganization of mental health programs and the current status of programs within the VISN. The business plan is a good source document that a Consumer Council can review.

Consumer Satisfaction - The VA surveys national consumer satisfaction, and this information is available for review by the Consumer Council. These data are helpful for comparisons between VISNs and Medical Centers.

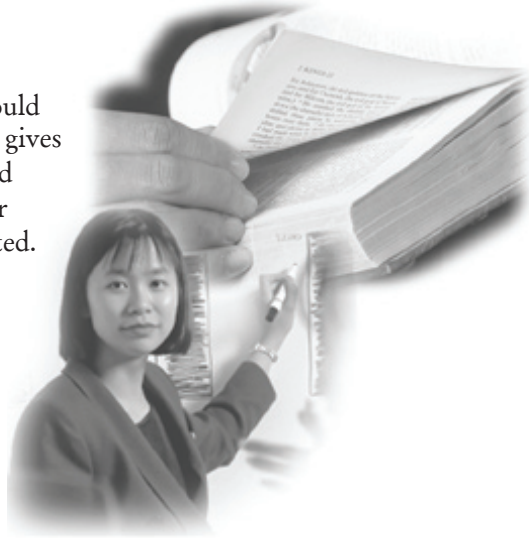
Focus Groups - These groups of veterans and/or family members can be brought together to give first hand information about the services received. Formalized studies already published can be helpful, but the Consumer Council might develop focus groups within the VISN or Medical Center to gain more insight into how veterans and families view mental health services that have been provided to them.

Develop a Tailored Measurement - Developing a tailored measurement tool may be a project for a Consumer Council. This tool can be a simple measurement that would look at different issues impacting the quality of services or the perception of the quality of services. Professional mental health staff would be helpful in the development of such a tool. Access issues and barriers to care particular to the VISN or Medical Center can be examined. This tool would provide a more steady source of information about consumer satisfaction.

Reporting

Annual Report

The Consumer Council should prepare a yearly report that gives its statement of purpose and goals. The achievements for the year should be highlighted. Based on the work of the Council recommendations should be communicated clearly so that there is a record that can be forwarded to the Medical Center and the VISN.



Feedback to Consumer Council

The Consumer Council needs to receive feedback about its work and recommendations. There should be a mechanism put into place to let the Consumer Council know if its recommendations have been accepted and enacted. The morale of the Consumer Council will be affected by the impact of its work. The VISN CEO and Mental Health leadership needs to acknowledge the work done by the Consumer Council.

Linkage to the VISN

A reporting pathway should be established that circulates the council's recommendations and their status of recommendations to the VISN CEO and the appropriate committees within the VISN and Medical Centers (ie: Management Assistance Council, planning committees etc).

Achievements

The work of the Council can be put in publications of the various agencies that belong to the council. The Medical Center may have a newsletter where an article can be featured that discusses the recommendations of the council and highlights some of the activities that have taken place during the year. It is important to build a public relations part to the Council so that there is visibility.

Glossary

VHA Veterans Health Administration

VISN Veterans Integrated Service Network

CEO Chief Executive Officer

Mental Health Service Line - The organization of the various mental health programs in a VA Medical Center under one program.

Chief Network Officer - Director over all the Network Directors of which there are 22.

Mental Health Consumer Council - A group composed of users of VA services, families, Veteran Service Organizations and advocates for the mentally ill.

Management Assistance Council - The Council established in each of the 22 VISNs that have stakeholder representation which includes, veterans, Veteran Service Organizations, VA staff, Unions and other community organizations that have an interest in VA operations. This is organized under the VISN Director.

Questions and Comments can be sent to:

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